# Classical Philology

## THE LAW OF BREVES BREVIANTES IN THE LIGHT OF PHONETICS

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It is my object in this paper to discuss a question which is probably troubling the minds of a good many students of old Latin verse, and if possible to suggest a solution. But I want to avoid going into a multitude of details which would probably only confuse the main issue. I will write briefly, as to fellow-students who are well acquainted with the phenomena to which I refer and who will themselves supply the gaps in my exposition and correct it, if it falls at some points into overstatement. For criticism I shall be grateful. If I am on altogether wrong lines, the sooner I am put right the better for me.[1]

[1] In a former paper (*Classical Review* XX [1906], 158 f.) I said that the phenomena coming under the head of the "Breves Breviantes" law may require to be reinterpreted if Plautine verse is to be regarded as "semi-quantitative" rather than fully quantitative. I will not attempt here to justify the use of the term "semi-quantitative"; for that would lead me into a discussion of the important part played by accent (word-accent and sentence-accent) in Plautine verse, and for that I have not room.—I note that my general position has been challenged by Professor Harkness (*Classical Philology* II, 63); in reply I would beg him to note the difference between "inner falls" and "outer falls" (see p. 9 below). Quantitative rhythm of the iambic or trochaic order depends on the shortness of the inner falls (i.e., those which come between the two rises of the iambic or trochaic dipody) just as much as on the length of the rises. But a long syllable may be used at either end of the series – ‿ – without disturbing the quantitative rhythm. This is shown by Greek verse, in which the outer, but not the inner, falls can be formed by a long syllable. The Greek comedians, no doubt, often form their inner falls of two short syllables; but not, I think, without some sacrifice of the true iambic rhythm. When the step is taken of admitting a long syllable to the inner fall I maintain that the verse can no longer be described as fully quantitative.

The existence of a law of Breves Breviantes—or something which corresponds to what is commonly described by that name—in the sphere of Latin morphology is indisputable. We are face to face with such shortenings as *benĕ*, *malĕ*, *amăt*, *lubĕt*, *monĭtus* (by analogy of *monĭtūrus*, from *monĕtūrus*, cf. *Monēta*), etc.—shortenings the evidence for which may be seen in any classical writer of Latin verse.[1] It seems unfortunate, however, that this law should be described by a term which ignores an essential factor of the shortening. So far as I have observed, at any rate, all writers on the subject make the presence of a *stress* on the Brevis or on the syllable which follows the Brevianda an element in the case, without which the law would be inoperative: *bénĕ*, *málĕ*, etc.; *pudĭcítiam*, *iuvĕntútis*, etc. (these latter being found only in OL verse, Amph. 930, 154, etc.). The term "shortening shorts," however, suggests that a short syllable has in itself the power of shortening the syllable which follows, by a process which some writers have described as "assimilation of quantity," apart from stress of voice.[2]

Another point that I notice in the current statements of this law is the inadequacy of the phonetic explanation which is offered. Victor Henry defends the doctrine of assimilation of quantity as follows:

Iambic words like *duō* show a curious peculiarity. It is physically possible to pronounce successively an accented short vowel and an unaccented long vowel; but, especially if the accent is strongly marked, it will be noticed that the long vowel then tends scarcely to exceed in length the preceding short vowel. Hence, in versification previous to the Augustan age, all words of this kind were treated, at the option of the writer, either

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[1] The fact that *māter* and *frāter* have a short final syllable in the earliest Latin, just as much as *păter*, has been recently accounted for by Skutsch (*Glotta* II, 151 f.) by the supposition that all these forms are properly vocatives, which have taken over the function of nominatives. In many exceptions to the law the long quantity may be explained as restored by analogy.

[2] "The term 'Breves Breviantes' originated as an explanation of certain facts of OL verse structure: and if the facts in question admit of a better explanation, some new term will be called for in morphology also. In most cases the reduction of a vowel is due to weakness of stress; but it may also be due to increase of speed on the part of the speaker, when he is conscious that he has to utter a good many sounds in one breath-group." (I take this statement from a letter by my friend Professor Rippmann, whom I am glad to find in general sympathy with the contention of this paper.)

as iambics or as pyrrhics, and we find the scansion *rŏgă* = *rŏgā*, *pŭtă*, *uĭdĕ*, *dŏmĭ*, *uŏlŏ*, *rŏgŏ*, *hŏmŏ*, etc.[1]

The appeal is to the experience and ear of the reader.

Similarly Lindsay remarks, "We ourselves, if we pronounce a phrase of this kind, feel that the short syllable *că*- exercises a shortening influence in this position upon the following long syllable -*vē*."[2]

I know of no such law of phonology as is here implied. In an English word like "echo" the second syllable is to my ear longer than the first; indeed such words as "echo," "shadow," "never" tend to become fully iambic before a pause, the second syllable being lengthened as a kind of balance to the accented first syllable. Thus the ordinary prose pronunciation of "shadow" seems to me not very different from that which it has in Tennyson's verse (*The Last Tournament*)—

And friends and foes were shadows (˘ –) in the mist.

Distrusting my own ear I appealed to Mr. Henry Sweet, and he gave me welcome and unequivocal confirmation.

There can be no doubt that in such words as *echo* the second vowel is longer than the first. When such words are drawled the lengthening falls entirely on the unaccented vowel, as in "what a *pityyy!*" That there is no necessity for shortening *dŭō* into *dŭŏ* is proved by the fact that in Old English the final *u* of the neuter plural is dropped at the end of long monosyllables like *hūs*, *word*, but kept in such words as *scĭpu* . . . .

exactly the opposite of what we should expect from the law of Breves Breviantes. So much for the phonetic basis of the law!

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[1] *Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin*, Eng. Transl., 87.

[2] *A Short Historical Latin Grammar* 34 f. Compare the following statements of Skutsch and Lindsay in reference to the pronunciation of words like *uoluptatem:* "Everyone can convince himself by a practical experiment how difficult it is, when speaking with a certain degree of rapidity, to give its proper length to the middle syllable of a group consisting of ˘ – ≍ , if the first or the third syllable has an expiratory accent of the strength which we must ascribe to the Latin accent: one's own experiment will convince one better than a theoretical argument" (Skutsch *Forschungen* 7). Lindsay says (*Latin Language* 201 f.): "The normal scansion of all these second syllables is that of classical poetry; but the position of the syllable between a short syllable on the one hand and an accented syllable on the other made it especially liable to be slurred in pronunciation, so that the dramatic poets, who followed more closely the pronunciation of everyday life than others, felt themselves at liberty, when the exigencies of meter demanded, to treat it as a short syllable." That the second syllable of words like *uoluptātem, fenestrātus* offers some impediment to utterance, and that it is difficult for our English or German organs of speech to do full justice to its length, is no doubt true.

I hasten to withdraw the note which I wrote in the Appendix to my edition of the *Rudens* (ed. Minor, 1901, p. 169).

It seems then that the term "Breves Breviantes" might well be replaced by some term which should suggest a more adequate explanation of the facts of morphology to which it is applied.

But what I am concerned with here is not morphology but Old Latin prosody, the most prominent feature of which is in current theory brought into connection with the above-mentioned morphological facts. It is supposed that the shortenings found in *bĕnĕ*, *mălĕ*, etc., find their counterparts in OL verse, which is said either to shorten long syllables following a short, or to "reflect the pronunciation of everyday life" (Lindsay), or to treat long syllables following a short as "metrically short." Take Skutsch's statement of the law:

An iambic sequence of syllables which has the stress (*Ton*) on the short syllable, or which is immediately followed by the stressed syllable, becomes pyrrhichic (*wird pyrrhichisch*).[1]

The last two words are, probably intentionally, ambiguous; "becomes pyrrhichic" may mean either "becomes a pyrrhic" or "becomes equivalent to a pyrrhic"; the latter might be identical with "counts as a pyrrhic"—which was all that the originator of the law meant when he used the word *gelten* in his formula.[2] The word *Ton* in Skutsch's statement is also ambiguous, and intentionally so; it is selected, as the author says, so as to cover ictus (verse-stress) as well as accent (word-stress). Brix expressed the same thing more explicitly when he said that the *ictus metricus* is very frequently equivalent in verse to the word-accent.[3] Lindsay, regarding the *ictus metricus* as inoperative in this connection, words the law as follows, and attempts (not very successfully in my opinion) to explain all the phenomena by an appeal to the word-accent or the sentence-accent:

After a short syllable an unaccented syllable, which was long by nature or (more frequently) by position, was pronounced half-long in ordinary

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[1] 1891; in the *Jahresbericht über die Fortschritte der romanischen Philologie* 33; repeated in the author's *Forschungen (Plautinisches und romanisches)* 6 f. See also Sommer *Handbuch der lateinischen Laut- und Formenlehre* (1902) 141, 161.

[2] C. F. W. Müller *Plautinische Prosodie* (1869) 85.

[3] *Einleitung* to the *Trinummus*, 1st ed. (1864), p. 14; 5th ed. (1907, by Niemeyer), p. 16.

speech, and scanned by the dramatic poets either long or short, when the accent fell on the following syllable or on the preceding (short) syllable.[1]

There is also another important difference between Lindsay and his immediate predecessors (Müller, Klotz, and Skutsch). They say nothing about these shortenings being based on the pronunciation of ordinary life; Müller's phrase "count as short" seems, indeed, to imply something different from actual shortening; and Klotz went so far as to declare the shortening to be a purely metrical phenomenon: thus he called the law a *metrisches Kürzungsgesetz* and said explicitly that the syllables which were *treated as short* by the OL dramatists were long in actual speech—a doctrine which in this form has found few supporters; for "metrical shortening" is only another name for *conventional* shortening, and verse so written is verse for the eye, not for the ear. Skutsch adopts an intermediate position. While, on the one hand, he denies (see below, p. 7) that these shortenings reflect the pronunciation of ordinary speech, he maintains that they are *analogous* to certain well-known phenomena of actual speech (*benĕ, malĕ*, etc.) and in accordance with the physiology of sound, i.e., that the effect of the *ictus metricus* in cases like *turbĭnĕs* is essentially similar in character to the effect of the accent in cases like *bénĕ*, though the former was never heard in ordinary speech; for the *ictus metricus*, like the word-accent, was an expiratory stress, and where the two come into conflict he holds that the accent must give way in order that the rhythm of the verse may not be sacrificed.

But, different as these statements are in some respects, they have one element in common—the doctrine that the syllables in question were in some sense shortened in OL verse. The very names *Iamben-Kürzungsgesetz, Breves Breviantes*, admit of no other interpretation. I admit that the phrases "counting as short," "scanned as short," and "metrically short," strictly interpreted, only mean that these syllables, though really long, were treated *as if they were short*. But Skutsch and his followers did not mean, when they spoke of iambic shortening, to imply that no real shortening takes place; and Lindsay definitely commits himself to the statement that the syllables in question were pronounced half-long (i.e., half-short) in

[1] *Jahresbericht über Plautus* (1907) 171; cf. Intr. to his edition of the *Captivi* 30.

ordinary speech; nor can he mean that the pronunciation in verse
was different; for he tells us elsewhere that "Plautus scanned as he
pronounced." Now it seems not to be generally realized that this
doctrine of shortening involves phonetic difficulties of the gravest
kind. No difficulty of pronunciation is involved in shortening the
final syllable of words like *abī, malō, bonās, manūs,* or the second
syllable of *verēbamini, vidēbatur,* or the first syllable of *(bene) ēvenisse,*
*(id) ēventurum,* etc. But appreciably to shorten a syllable which
is long by position (i.e., closed by a consonant and followed by another
consonant) is in some cases physically impossible except by dropping
one or more of the consonants.[1] Are we then to suppose that the
word *apstulisti* was pronounced *a-stulisti* in ordinary speech and in
the *Aulularia* of Plautus, l. 645 *(Quid apstulisti hinc?* beginning a
trochaic septenarius) ? In some cases, no doubt, a different division
of syllables would get over the difficulty: *a-psurde, Ale-xander, volu-*
*ptatem, sene-ctutem, o-mnes,* etc., are conceivable, though hardly
plausible. But *a-pstulisti* is unpronounceable, and so is *e-xprobras.*
The only way of shortening the first syllable of this word in *Trin.*
318—*quid exprobras?*—is to turn the *x* into an *s* and attach it to
the next syllable *(e-sprobras),* neither of which measures exactly
commends itself: the word has its ordinary quantities in *Most.* 300—
*quor exprobras?* These are not isolated examples: we have the
same problem to face in connection with the supposed shortening
of the first syllable of a host of words like *inclamare, indignus, indili-*
*genter, invocatus, argentam, hercle,* and of the second syllable of words

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[1] This may sound like an overstatement in view of the fact that the law of Breves
Breviantes is accepted by many scholars who are eminent phoneticians; but it is con-
firmed by the great authority of Mr. Henry Sweet. In reply to a question addressed
to him by the present writer as to whether he considers it physically possible to
shorten fen*estra,* uol*up*tatem, *a*bstuli, sup*e*llex, he says "I cannot conceive of any
quantitative prosody making such groups as *str, bst, ll* short without omissions: *pt*
could be made short by pronouncing the two consonants simultaneously as in the
English *exactly.*" And again "Such a group as *str* could not possibly be made or felt
to be short even under the weakest accent—not in any language. It could not even be
regarded as half-short." If anyone doubts whether *bst* takes time to pronounce let
him articulate the German word 'pst' (=hush).—These difficulties, or difficulties like
them, seem to have been felt by Sommer, who in a note on p. 142 of his *Handbuch der*
*lat. Laut- und Formenlehre* says "The phonological explanation *(lautphysiologische*
*Ratio)* of this is not yet clear. In itself a syllable consisting of a vowel + consonant
can never be short in pronunciation." The name Abdulhamid has its first syllable
long whether it be pronounced *Abd-ul-hamid* or *Ab-dul-hamid.*

like *quadringenti* (which Lindsay would write *quadrigenti*), *taber-naculum*. The necessity of dropping a consonant in order to pro-duce shortening is especially clear where there is a doubled conso-nant—unpronounceable at the beginning of a syllable; e.g., *accepisti, ecce, occulto, supellectilis, annona:* yet it is generally supposed to be a characteristic of Latin, as of modern Italian, that both the consonants were pronounced in such cases. Nor is this the end of the *impasse* into which we are led by a strictly phonetic interpreta-tion of the doctrine of Breves Breviantes. For there are numerous examples in Plautus of words in which a syllable *closed by a con-sonant and also containing a naturally long vowel* has, according to this law, to be somehow shortened: e.g., *īnsidiae.* Here, even if the *n* could be taken over to the next syllable (a phonetic impossi-bility) we should still be left with a long *i.* How the syllable *īn*-can have been short or even half-short in ordinary speech passes my comprehension, especially as there are plenty of instances in Plautus in which the first syllable of this word is clearly long (e.g., *Curc.* 25). Yet we are asked to believe that in two successive lines of the *Pseudolus* (anapaestic meter) Plautus scanned and pronounced the first syllables of *īgnobilis* and *īnsidias* short: *Pseud.* 592 f. Other cases of this kind are *īgnavus* (Ter. *Eun.* 777), *īgnorabitur* (Plaut. *Men.* 468), *īnfimatis (Stich.* 493), *īnfuscabat (Cist.* 19), *ōrnatu (Trin.* 840*b*). Even more conclusive, as not needing any ancient testi-mony as to their quantity, are cases like vi*des q*uae sim *(Most.* 199), iu*ben m*i ire *(Amph.* 929). These syllables in this position were undoubtedly long (at least as long as a syllable containing a final long vowel, e.g., a*mō*) in ordinary speech. This was fully recog-nized by Skutsch on one occasion; he called it a "prinzipielle Un-richtigkeit" of Anton Marx that he took the "shortenings" of Plautus and Terence as evidence of the quantities of the vowels in ordinary speech.[1] Yet Skutsch still believes in real "shortening" in OL verse, ascribing it to conditions analogous to, though not identical with, those prevailing in ordinary speech (see above, p. 5) Appar-ently he does not realize the phonological difficulties to which I

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[1] *Berliner Philologische Wochenschrift* XXII (1902),1238: review of Anton Marx's *Hülfsbüchlein für die Aussprache der lat. Vokale in positionslangen Silben*, 3d ed., 1901.

have alluded above. It is easy to say that the syllables in question were shortened, but difficult to suggest *how* they were shortened or to conceive of the form which the words would assume as the result of such a process.

In comparison with the difficulty just discussed all other difficulties involved in the doctrine of Breves Breviantes shrink into insignificance. Yet it must be added that the theory of shortening is exposed to the old criticism of Bentley—"Mutantur tantum rei; crimen ipsum non eluitur: aut hi aut illi sunt culpae damnandi" (*Schediasma* 12 f.). This might be otherwise worded nowadays, in view of Lindsay's appeal to a "half-short" pronunciation in ordinary speech. But there is nevertheless a difficulty. Apart from the fact that the syllables in question are very often to be scanned as long in OL verse (e.g., *Capt.* 452 *abī*, 843 *iubē; Men.* 215 *venī; Bacch.* 777 *tacēs; Rud.* 442 and *Merc.* 359 *volūptatem; Trin.* 3 *adēst*), what induced the dactylic poets to go back to the long pronunciation? The answer ordinarily given—that the usage of Ennius and his followers was of the nature of an artificial reaction against the popular pronunciation of their times—does not satisfy me, for various reasons. For one thing, poetry made up of a succession of words pronounced in a manner corresponding to the pronunciation of the English "wind" in verse[1] would surely have been an offense to the ears of Roman readers. Besides, Latin was not so rich in short syllables and poor in long ones that the poets would have deliberately chosen to make syllables long which they might have made short. On the contrary they adopted various devices in order to secure short syllables.[2]

There still remains to be considered the evidence of artistic prose. There is no trace of the operation of a law of Breves Breviantes in the clausulae of Cicero's Orations, so far as I have been able to discover from Zielinski. On the contrary the *Clauselgesetz* postulates a long syllable in such cases. Thus the words *mihi, tibi, sibi, ibi, ubi,* have the second syllable long (Zielinski,[3] p. 183); so too the adverbial *modo,* and the words *ego, lego (ibid.).* And among

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[1] Cf. Lindsay *Intr. to Captivi* 12.

[2] See Bednara "Aus der Werkstatt der dactylischen Dichter" (*Archiv für lat. Lexicogr. und Gram.* XV, 223-32).

[3] *Das Clauselgesetz in Cicero's Reden* (1904).

Zielinski's examples will be found scansions like *possessoribus ăgrī tamen emantur* (p. 47), *impŭdentissima* (p. 64), *et vŏluptatibus* (*ibid.*), *patria mŏrī patiamini* (p. 77), *dŏlō mălō seiungere* (p. 86). The language of Cicero's speeches is, I suppose, as near an approximation to the language of ordinary life as we are likely to get. It is surely almost unthinkable that he should here have adopted an artificial pronunciation in order to secure a rhythmical ending for his clausulae; such a proceeding would have covered him with ridicule. And the fact that his practice agrees in the main with that of the dactylic poets may be appealed to as evidence that their prosody too was not of an artificial nature.

The bed-rock on which the whole theory of shortening rests is the observation of Müller that an iambic sequence of syllables ($\smile$ –) may form the rise or the fall of a foot in OL dramatic verse.[1] Hence it is assumed that if in Latin we find $\smile$ – where the Greeks would have put $\smile$ $\smile$ the second of the two syllables must be somehow shortened. Is this assumption justified? That is the question I wish to raise. I suggest that it is not. I see no a priori impossibility in the rise or fall of a foot being formed of two syllables of which the first is short, but the second long; and hence I find no need for a doctrine of shortening. Of course a rise or fall so constructed is quantitatively defective; but OL verse is quantitatively defective in another and an even more important respect—the habitual use of long inner falls.[2] If the Roman ear found nothing intolerable in the first and third lines of the following passage (and such lines occur on every page of Plautus), why should it necessarily have objected to the second?[3]

> Pro di im*mor*tales, in *aqua* numquam credidi
> Vol*up*tatem inesse tantum! ut hanc traxi lubens!
> Nimio *minus* altus pute*us* visust quam prius (*Rud.* 458 ff.).

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[1] I venture to use the terms which I have coined (see 2d ed. of the *Mostellaria*, 1907, p. 146) as a substitute for the terms "thesis" (*Hebung*) and "arsis" (*Senkung*)— or "arsis" and "thesis" as I should write if this article were to be published in England.

[2] The majority of falls (outer and inner taken together) are dimoric in OL dramatic verse.

[3] To my ear the second line is more rhythmical than the others, because it has all its inner falls short. On the shortness of the fall that comes between the two rises of each dipody quantitative rhythm depends.

I will put in two pleas in explanation of a usage which Bentley, too, thought very pardonable. In the first place, a rise or fall of the form ⏑ ‒ is only relatively unquantitative; for at least one of the two syllables is short, and this short syllable comes first, and so gives to the dissyllabic rise or fall a start on the right lines. Secondly, it seems never to have been noticed that in the case of a *rise* formed with ⏑ ‒ the short syllable which comes first is insufficient by itself to fill up the rise, which cannot be of smaller compass than two morae. Thus in a line like *Bacch.* 147,

> Omitte, Lyde, ac *cave* malo.—Quid, *cave* malo ?

when the speaker or reader comes to the rise of the third foot (and of the fifth) and is confronted with the short syllable *ca-*, he cannot stop there but is compelled by the demands of his ear (which expects a long syllable) to take in the next syllable as part of the rise. That the syllable thus taken in (*-vē*) makes the rise as a whole too long is true. But this only amounts to saying that a rise so constituted is not quantitatively exact. It ought to be dimoric; it actually is trimoric. A little extra length in a rise is at any rate a fault on the right side. Yet it is quite conceivable that the length of the second syllable would be slightly reduced in utterance *wherever it involved no difficulty of pronunciation to do so.* The use of ⏑ ‒ to form a fall involves, no doubt, more difficulty; for in the case of iambic and trochaic verse any fall may be, and an inner fall ought to be, monomoric. But, as the outer falls may be just as well long as short in Greek verse, and as the Greek comedians had gone great lengths in admitting dimoric inner falls of the form ⏑ ⏑,[1] their Roman imitators went one better (or worse) by obliterating the distinction between the inner and the outer fall to a great extent;[2] and with this distinction there also disappeared, to a great extent, the quantitative distinction between the fall and the rise. In this way I explain to myself how it was that the OL verse writers came to extend to falls in iambic and trochaic verse the practice which they

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[1] E.g. (to take an extreme case), κατάβα, κατάβα, κατάβα, κατάβα.—καταβήσομαι, Arist. *Wasps* 979. See note of Starkie.

[2] I have not forgotten that Klotz maintained that accented long syllables were excluded from inner falls; but Plautus admits them far more frequently than Klotz knew.

had come to regard as justified in rises. Perhaps the way was made easier by the dimoric falls of anapaestic verse; in a line like *Stich*. 37,

> *Tace* sis: *cave* sis audiam ego istuc

or *Men.* 362,

> Te hic stare foris, *fores* quoi pateant

the word of the form ⌣ – needs no more justification in the fall than in a rise of any kind of verse.

The above suggestion of mine might be regarded as hazardous were it not supported by the structure of some other kind of verse. But I am in a position to appeal to an analogous case. That Germanic verse has a quantitative element in it is recognized by the best authorities (Sievers and Schipper). The rises are formed as a general rule by syllables which are both long and accented. The falls are formed by unaccented syllables (or syllables bearing only a secondary accent), either short or long, or by several such (x or xx or xxx); and what is of immediate importance for my purpose is that any rise may be resolved into ⌣x, i.e., *into an accented short syllable followed by a syllable which may be either short or long*. The analogy to the Plautine *cáuē* is perfect. An illustration of the same thing may be given from modern English verse, if my readers will allow me to scan it in the way I think it ought to be scanned. Shakespeare shall give us an example of the pure dissyllabic rise (⌣ ⌣):

> My father's *spĭrĭt* in arms; all is not well.

Milton provides an instance of the rise of the form ⌣ – (*P. L.* VI, 660):

> Out of such *prison* those *spirits* of purest light.

To our English ears *spirits* (⌣ –) is as acceptable as *spirit*. Why then should not Plautus have allowed himself a *potest* as well as a *potĭs*, especially in a language which had a preponderance of long syllables?

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